

Moving Toward the Market and Away from Public Service? Effects of Resource Dependency and Academic Capitalism

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Abstract

Research-extensive land-grant institutions face the unique challenge of asking faculty to fulfill a historic mission of public service in a time of scarce resources. This article discusses the parallel between the effects of resource dependency and academic capitalism on the research enterprise and on public service endeavors through the perceptions of faculty at a research-extensive land-grant institution. Results confirm that the nature of faculty public service work is shifting in scope, scale, process, and audience due to the scarcity of resources for public service and subsequent changes in faculty behavior.

Perhaps the most difficult, as well as the most enduring, question of public service is the question of how we can afford it—or indeed whether we can afford not to do it (*P. H. Crosson, Public Service in Higher Education: Practices and Priorities*).

Introduction

Public institutions of higher education, including land-grant universities, are generally considered to have a threefold mission: teaching, research, and public service (*Mawby 1996*). Consequently, institutions spend a portion of their revenues in each area. Expenditures for public service have been on the rise in the last decade. By 2000, public service expenditures of public institutions averaged 4.9 percent; research-extensive public institutions had the highest commitment in this area, at 6.4 percent. However, these research-extensive public institutions had higher expenditures in instruction (25.5%), research (17.3%), and academic support (7.6%) (*NCES 2003*). The sources of these funds play a significant role in the direction and outcomes of the resulting research, teaching, and public service. Slaughter and Leslie (1997) argue that the recent decline in state allocations to higher education has forced faculty to exhibit marketlike behaviors to secure funds for competitive research. These behaviors, termed academic capitalism, change the nature of faculty work and have important consequences on reward, undergraduate education, and disciplinary prestige.

Fields such as engineering, medicine, computer science, and biotechnology have been encouraged to pursue business/industry partnerships in order to enhance and increase levels of public service scholarship in these disciplines (*Braxton, Luckey, and Helland 2002*). Although the intentions of this encouragement are good, the implications for fields further from the market and the potential resource chasm created between these fields must be considered.

This article extends the application of resource dependency theory and academic capitalism beyond the scope of Slaughter and Leslie (1997) and Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) into the public service domain. By presenting the results of a study designed to determine the effects of resource dependency and academic capitalism on faculty at a land-grant institution who are involved in public service, as well as on their public service programs, this article serves as an initial step in acknowledging the changing experiences of faculty engaged in public service. Throughout the article, the term public service encompasses outreach, community service, and engagement as activities that benefit those outside the walls of the institution.

Public service is generally not considered a prestige-maximizing activity like research nor a core institutional function like teaching, and perhaps this is why little research has been focused on the effects of academic capitalism on public service. Land-grant institutions are a special case, however, where public service is not only mandated but also can serve to heighten institutional prestige and to secure a market niche in the higher education industry. Land-grant institutions are now asking faculty to fulfill a historic mission of public service in a time of scarce resources, a juxtaposition that has led faculty to regard the service mission with confusion and reluctance.

Theoretical Framework

Resource dependency theory (*Pfeffer and Salancik 1978*) focuses on the interplay between an organization and its environment. Resource dependency suggests that “organizations deprived of critical resources will seek new resources” (*Slaughter and Leslie 1997, 17*). Organizations depend on resources, and hence on the environment, for survival. Outside agencies are able to exert some degree of influence over an organization when they control scarce resources that the organization cannot obtain elsewhere. Significant organizational action goes toward negotiations to

ensure continued accessibility of needed resources. Additionally, formal organizational roles (e.g., technology transfer or legal departments) are utilized to help control and stabilize exchange of resources between the organization and its environment. As an organization attempts to gain more control over the activities of outside agencies that can supply needed resources, it must surrender some of its own autonomy in exchange. Hence organizations experience conflict between the desire to maintain organizational autonomy and the desire to reduce the uncertainty that accompanies the lack of a steady resource stream. Resource dependency also recognizes that coalitions within organizations have varying interests (*Pfeffer and Salancik 1978*). Those members of an organization who require resources will attempt to control and influence the organization. Power within an organization comes with the attainment of critical and scarce resources.

The theory of academic capitalism (*Slaughter and Leslie 1997*) builds on these and other aspects of resource dependency. In response to decreased state funding, faculty are increasingly exhibiting marketlike behaviors to secure external funds for research. Faculty in the technosciences are closest to the market and most successful at securing these funds. In return, the departments and disciplines that are able to bring in scarce resources exhibit significant influence within higher education institutions.

Slaughter and Rhoades (*2004*) address the ways that academic capitalism has moved beyond research into the teaching and learning domains and imply that in these domains, capitalist motivations have replaced those of the public good. Although Slaughter and Rhoades dismiss resource dependency as causal, they continue to acknowledge the importance of both resource dependency and academic capitalism in understanding recent faculty and funding trends. This article examines how these theories apply to the faculty pursuit of public service efforts.

Methodology and Findings

Findings presented in this article were generated from a climate-based approach to institutional research. Perceived climate studies are concerned with current versus deep-rooted attitudes (*Peterson and Spencer 2000*). Perceptions may be accurate or inaccurate, but they guide the behavior and expectations of the participants. Climate studies commonly use both interview and survey techniques to assess how participants think about ideal versus real organizational life. This study on the perceived effects of

resource dependence was approached from an epistemological foundation of social constructivism, which posits that people make sense of new experiences “against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth” (*Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 197*).

Southern University: This case study is derived from a climate study at an institution referred to in this article as Southern University to mask its identity. Southern University is a large research-extensive land-grant university. It was founded in the late 1800s as a land-grant institution under the 1862 Morrill Act. The institution is respected for its public service work, but it is also nationally acclaimed for its research endeavors and highly ranked for its ability to capture research funds. Institutional reports reveal a recommitment to public service in recent years and articulate the goal of becoming a “premier engaged institution.” Accordingly, the organizational structure and the highest level of administration were augmented in 2000 to include a senior administrator for public service. The findings of this climate study address faculty perceptions on various aspects of public service as the institution moves toward being more engaged.

Survey and focus groups: An online survey was sent via e-mail in March 2003 to 3,133 on-campus faculty and professional staff at Southern University. The survey, composed of Likert-scale questions and three open-ended questions, collected demographic information and addressed value perceptions, reporting, and involvement levels regarding public service. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each of the Likert-scale questions. The survey response rate was 25 percent (782 respondents). In July 2003, a nonresponse survey was sent to 330 individuals; its response rate was 26 percent (86 respondents). It confirmed the results of the original survey respondents. Demographic percentages for faculty respondents of both surveys closely mirrored the college affiliations, rank, gender, and ethnicity of all faculty on Southern University’s campus. The following survey results and discussion include only data from faculty who responded to the initial survey ($n = 371$, or 23% of faculty at Southern University according to integrated postsecondary education data system [IPEDS] data available at the university’s Web site). Of the 371 faculty respondents, 80 (22%) had extension appointments, a traditional public service appointment at land-grant institutions.

Although exact number of faculty with extension appointments at Southern University is unknown, the overwhelming majority of these faculty work in agriculture, life and environmental sciences, and engineering.

Table 1: Faculty Perceptions of Value of Public Service

Category	Percentage of faculty agreeing the category in question highly values public service
My Dean	88%
My Department Head	82%
Southern University	75%
My Colleagues	71%
My College as a whole	71%
My President	67%
In Reappointment, Promotion, and Tenure Process	35%

Faculty respondents to the initial survey reported that although public service work was highly valued by individuals on campus, it was not valued in the reward system (table 1). The open-ended survey questions gave faculty the opportunity to discuss this and issues of funding and resources. A series of focus groups with faculty, staff, and students was conducted to probe more deeply into the survey results and responses to open-ended questions. Focus groups are designed to “elicit perceptions, information, attitudes and ideas from a group in which each participant possesses experience with the phenomenon under study” (Kelly 2003, 50). Three faculty focus groups of approximately eight participants each were conducted. Participants represented seven of the ten colleges on the campus and varied by college, rank, extension appointment, gender, and ethnicity. Participants were asked to reflect on Southern University’s definition of public service, their personal roles, the administration, resource allocation, institutional structures, and assessment. Each session was tape recorded, transcribed, and coded using inductive techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1990); codes from each focus group were then compared and synthesized. Some faculty were contacted after the transcription of the focus group tapes to provide further clarification. Documents such as tenure policies, memoranda, and institutional self-studies and reports as well as observations of meetings also

contributed to the data used in this case study. Documents were obtained through primary informants, faculty, and the university administration.

Three major findings related to issues of resource dependence and academic capitalism emerged from the faculty focus groups.

1. Public service work is impacted by the trends of academic capitalism in ways similar to the research enterprise (e.g., need to seek external funds; shift from basic to applied work); however, it experiences compounded and negative effects (e.g., difficult search for alternative resource streams; less prestigious than research).
2. Faculty perceive that resources and support for faculty public service are limited despite the dual missions of excellence in research and public service at a research-extensive land-grant institution.
3. Bureaucratic offices that were created to manage resources serve as obstacles and make it difficult to perform public service work.

Discussion

Resources are vital to the success of faculty engaged in public service at Southern University, and faculty experience new challenges as resources become scarce and are sought from new and different venues. New funding sources are perceived to change the nature of public service projects and their societal benefits. Faculty have mixed feelings about the success of their collaborations with on- and off-campus partners in public service endeavors. Additionally, at a large, complex institution like Southern University, the management of contact between university personnel and outside agencies can be chaotic at best. Faculty revealed how their dependence on resources and changed behaviors to obtain them are related to the changed nature of the public service performed, the lack of university commitment of resources, and the navigation of institutional bureaucracy.

The changed nature of public service: Slaughter and Leslie (1997) discuss how the research enterprise has changed in recent years from one that values basic research to one that values applied research and the benefits that accompany partnerships with industry and government. Consequently, academics who are involved with the private sector may be redefining “the public”

to focus primarily on industry collaborations that generate income and moving toward an ideology that sees “anything beneficial to industry as beneficial to society as a whole” (*Campbell and Slaughter 1999, 343*). Faculty at Southern University have noticed that the philosophical underpinnings of public service are also challenged as service becomes more associated with market forces. An associate professor in extension and youth development summed up the resulting approach: “The definition and the criteria for effective [public service] has become more and more multinational corporation and less and less American democracy. When we define ourselves that way, we have an extension but we don’t have the extension that has perpetuated the American way of life.”

“Faculty perceived that the nature of public service has also changed in terms of who is performing it, why, and how often.”

Faculty perceived that the nature of public service has also changed in terms of who is performing it, why, and how often. Public service, even at a research-extensive land-grant institution, is considered a peripheral activity for many faculty. When resources for public service are not made available, there may be little motivation for faculty, particularly those without extension appointments, to seek funding for public service initiatives. Some faculty noted that the limited resources for public service changed the scale of their work, but not the scope. Other faculty were clearly limited in scope to working only with those who could help support their travel and other expenses. Many faculty reported that they limited their activity in public service as a consequence of limited resources. A professor of animal science gave an example of such effects: “When asked to provide a presentation or to be involved in a discussion group, I must charge mileage and expenses to either a research account, a teaching account or assume personal responsibility for the expenses. In other words, I do not have access to a budget which is truly dedicated to [public service] . . . [I] turn down opportunities on a regular basis, particularly since our other budgets are being reduced.”

Faculty also described how the nature of public service has changed because grantors and foundations impose their priorities on public service program development. As predicted by the theory of resource dependence, these partnerships are vital to faculty

who need resources for public service; however, they result in a loss of control over the direction of public service programming. In the words of one participant, "Projects are pretty much linked to funder priorities and meeting funder needs is primary. . . . We have been successful in meeting projected grant and contract outcomes, but we have less freedom in setting and pursuing goals that might better serve the state when we are restricted by funder priorities."

Strategies for capturing limited resources: Slaughter and Leslie (1997) describe changes in the way faculty approach the research enterprise as a result of reduced funding. Similarly, the issues of resource dependency and presence of academic capitalist behaviors in faculty public service work likely result from the university's limited base support for public service. Faculty expressed their belief that the university should increase its support of public service, but they also acknowledged that faculty must employ new strategies to capture scarce resources for public service work.

"Interdisciplinary public service efforts are considered potential new sources of funds . . . as well as avenues that would allow all faculty to share their expertise and to benefit from resources that flow to the closest-to-market disciplines."

As in the research enterprise, faculty in fields closest to the market had success in contract and grant procurement for public service, but faculty in fields further from the market reported less success.

As faculty move from their familiar ways of conducting public service work to a new approach, they need support strategies within their academic communities to help maximize the use of limited resources (O'Meara, Kaufman, and Kuntz 2003). Faculty discussed taking an interdisciplinary approach to public service in order to involve

faculty who have been disenfranchised by Southern University's perceived focus on the technosciences. Interdisciplinary public service efforts are considered potential new sources of funds (Walshok 1996) as well as avenues that would allow all faculty to share their expertise and to benefit from resources that flow to the closest-to-market disciplines. Although faculty supported this in concept, they rarely saw an interdisciplinary approach in practice, as one participant's comment reflected.

It kind of encouraged me when I saw [the senior administrator for public service] bring in 36 million dollars for this training thing. . . . If that's what they do, bring in money, and then if they engage people from lots of disciplines . . . if they truly make that an interdisciplinary program . . . that'd be great. If it becomes another little power center . . . where nobody gets to play except the ones that they choose, that's interesting, too.

Faculty also discussed the controversial strategy of charging a fee for service (*Barth et al. 1999; Jackson and Johnson 1999*). The recent emphasis at Southern University on providing services that attract a paying audience exemplifies one way that resource dependency has led to the changed nature of public service. In other words, faculty perceived that the university may not address areas of the greatest need because many individuals or groups who rely on university expertise and services lack the resources to support the public service work of faculty. Administration may further discourage service to some of these nonpaying entities. An associate professor of history summarized the change of approach.

I'm a great believer that people of the state [who should be served by the land-grant institution] includes not just fortune 500 companies, it includes not just the agribusiness but the rural farmer. It includes mill workers without jobs . . . [Southern University's] President and the Trustees are much more "When we mean serving the state, we mean serving big industry" and . . . everything else [other public service] is . . . really not worth doing and don't waste your time.

Bureaucratic obstacles: Resource dependency theory suggests that formal organizational roles are fashioned to help control and stabilize the exchange of resources between an organization and its environment (*Pfeffer and Salancik 1978*). As with the research enterprise, technology transfer and legal departments, and even departmental administrators, may become involved in public service endeavors when faculty are working with external agencies. Institutional infrastructure was developed at Southern University to help faculty navigate the new procedures associated with public service, but these additions seem mostly to frustrate faculty. From relatively simple levels of departmental control to the larger university infrastructure, faculty believed these hurdles made it

difficult to pursue public service initiatives and to inspire uninvolved faculty to increase their activity level in public service. One participant gave a perspective on the frustrations and lack of support encountered in such endeavors.

Why would professors want to do [public service]? To offer a [continuing education] course you have to go through all these little fiefdoms, alright, so no, it's not "go to [the continuing education office]" anymore. Now we have to go to [distance education] and [distance education] has to go to someplace else, and then they have to come back. Now I have to go to the [graduate school]. Oh my gosh, I mean, it's endless what we have to do to get the job done, and nobody intervenes.

Resource dependency theory states that "others who control resources may be undependable, particularly when resources are scarce" (*Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, 258*). Accordingly, the resource gatekeepers within an institution can affect public service programs. Internal gatekeeper groups may inhibit or unintentionally sabotage faculty public service efforts. Faculty described how inaccurate information from the university resulted in costly mistakes and the further stretching of already thin resources acquired for public service. Internal gatekeepers also sometimes exert control over faculty public service efforts by forbidding them, as in the case described by this professor of business management.

[A mandate] came from the legal department saying the university could not be involved [in a particular public service endeavor]. . . . Let's say there are very valid reasons why the university can't get involved. I would debate that, but let's say there are. That shouldn't have been the end of the conversation. The end of the conversation should have gone something like this—"The university cannot get involved because of these reasons, however, we might be able to go at it from this perspective if we can find some non-profit outside that can take this on, and just help them find the insurance so that you can go forward." There are other opportunities. There are ways to get around this, but they never took that extra step, and so that's one of the problems that we have with [public service] is we have this one part that's trying to push us forward and get more faculty engagement and we've got the other side is pulling us back and saying "thou shall not."

Some lucrative public service endeavors utilize the licensure of intellectual property or sales of a related product to fund future public service. Some faculty shared negative experiences involving university legal advisors. A professor of English related details stemming from one of the university's more lucrative public service ventures.

As the dollar amounts grow higher in any endeavor, University administration takes over in negotiations that lead to licenses and other agreements to sustain projects. This service is helpful and also potentially very hurtful. For if it is done with the left hand, by busy people who do not know their tasks, the projects will suffer and fail. . . . The University's delegated negotiators . . . failed to bring in a license to further the marketing and distribution of our second edition, even though the texts themselves were fully completed by the state-mandated deadlines and at the press. . . . Without a license in hand, the University had no bridge money or the will to find any to salvage the project. . . . When faculty are told that they cannot legally negotiate on behalf of the University and then the University's negotiators do not come through, the project is doomed.

This particular instance resulted in a lawsuit against the university that led to the disbursement of departmental funds set aside for future public service efforts. Hence what this faculty member described as the department's "nest egg" for funding future public service was depleted because of the inaction of a group charged with specific responsibilities.

Implications

Slaughter and Leslie (1997) find that academic capitalism busies faculty with the constant work of acquiring funds. Still, faculty continue to pursue research endeavors because these are prestige-maximizing activities for the institution and the individual. On the other hand, resource dependence and academic capitalism may result in the permanent decline of faculty public service. In a time of limited resources, it may be difficult to sustain even a minimal number of engaged faculty in public service work (Holland 1997), much less to encourage other faculty to launch public service endeavors. Institutions of higher education, particularly research-extensive universities, exist in a competitive culture and do not yet offer recognition for alternative pathways to excellence and

prestige that involve doing things that are different, such as public service and engagement (*Holland 2005*). The situation facing faculty at land-grant institutions who pursue public service in a time of scarce resources may be best summed up by the remarks of a Southern University faculty member in agricultural and resource economics.

Dependency on outside resources can be both good and bad. The benefits are that you can expand your programming to new issues and bring in resources that the university is incapable of providing. Some degree of reliance on outside resources keeps your programs competitive and on the cutting-edge. If your programs are competing for outside resources and winning, then that is a sign that you are doing something right. Outside funding needs to be balanced with stable and reliable funding from the University. Non-competitive funding enables you to keep your program focused on educational objectives that may not be important to outside funding agencies. If you are always chasing money, your program could become incoherent. You'll do anything to get the money.

This study, though limited by a focus on one institution, clearly shows that the effects of resource dependency and academic capitalism on public service parallel the effects of these trends on the research enterprise in a number of ways. Faculty at this research-extensive land-grant institution perceive that university resources dedicated to public service are limited, which prompts faculty to seek resources outside the university. Procurement of resources for public service is often accomplished through grants and contracts and fee for service, and faculty in fields closest to the market have the most success in obtaining funds for public service. However, these resource acquisition strategies are not without a price of their own. There is a consensus among faculty that this type of movement to market-based public service impedes the ability of higher education to serve all people who need university resources and expertise. Faculty also have less autonomy in pursuing public service endeavors; they are in some ways bound by the actions of administrators and offices within the institution that help to coordinate their relationship with external agencies and resource providers. This infrastructure of "bureaucratic obstacles" may militate against faculty partici-

pation in university-sanctioned public service, particularly since public service is not considered a prestige-maximizing activity. Faculty who engage in public service at institutions like Southern University are often working against dominant values and norms (O'Meara 2005).

This research suggests that resource dependency and academic capitalism direct public service efforts toward those who can pay. In order to more clearly understand the impact of academic capitalism on the public good, additional research should solicit information from community and government partners who may be affected by the fiscal pressures that universities face in conducting public service. Institutions should also take steps to encourage interdisciplinary public service ventures or target faculty in disciplines furthest from the market when allo-

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cating institutional resources for public service. "Faculty are the key players in helping campuses realize their goals of engagement" (Ward 2003, 119). Institutions that facilitate the joining of faculty, external agencies, and funds toward the creation of successful public service endeavors should examine, analyze, and share their processes with others who face the challenges of limited resources.

Land-grant institutions, from the time of their founding, have considered no area to be beneath their purview in the agenda of scholarship, and hence in the agenda of public service (McDowell 2003). The unique accessibility of these institutions and their resources for the broader public good may be in danger unless higher education leaders are willing to reconsider the mission, obligations, and resource allocation patterns of land-grant institutions.

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